



Easter
April 1, 2018
Mark 10:45 & 1 Corinthians 15:19-26

A Ransom for Many



Over the past two weeks, these items have been posted to refrigerators or tucked in desk drawers across the country. March Madness, the Road to the Final Four, once again has embraced the country. My family maybe left a curling iron in a hotel over spring break, but my son made sure that he had the family brackets. The American Gaming Association estimates that 70 million brackets were filled out across the country. Statistically speaking, that means that around 600 of you filled one out. This has been a historic tournament of one upset after another. And it all comes down to tomorrow night. Over the past two weeks, Villanova/Kansas and Michigan/Loyola have each taken down five opponents and now there's just one opponent standing between them and their one shining moment on the championship podium. Second place doesn't really matter. If you can't beat the best, you aren't the best. If you can't beat the champion, you aren't the champion.

Over the past six weeks, we've watched Jesus take on various enemies. We watched him give up his dignity, his power, his authority and marveled at the cost he was willing to pay as a ransom for us. Two days ago, we saw him stand face-to-face with sin. It was a fierce battle on the cross. Sin put its full weight behind every punch it landed on Jesus. Jesus cried out in agony. He whispered in thirst. But he didn't lose. In the Friday darkness he declared victory, "It is finished." The account for the world's sin, your sin, was paid in full. Yet, when the buzzer sounded on Jesus' life, when he breathed his last, the celebratory confetti didn't fall. The pep band didn't start playing. Rather, the spotlight came out and shone on one more enemy, the biggest enemy of all – death. Although death's sting was removed when Jesus defeated sin, death still towered over Jesus as he was placed into that grave. And its gravity so perfectly pictured by that seemingly unmovable stone.

One look out those windows says Death still faces us. One look out those windows says death still has its chains around them. Ultimately, that's what makes death the greatest enemy. You see, sin doesn't bother those people anymore. I don't know most of the people that are buried in front of these windows. But I know this, if Mr. Seifert had lustful thoughts on earth, he's not struggling with lust anymore. If Mrs. Seifert struggled with a loose tongue, she's not gossiping anymore. If Mr. Schroeder or Mrs. Buchholtz were misers on earth, they're not pinching their pennies anymore. Neither their sinful flesh, nor the world, not even the devil himself has any influence on any one of those people lying out there. That's one of the, dare I say, "beauties" of dying. Those things that torment us so much while living, release their grip. But death doesn't let go. The last link of the chain to be broken, the last enemy to be destroyed, is death.

Why? Why is death's grip so powerful? You have to go back to the beginning. What did God do on those six days of creation? Maybe you're dusting the cobwebs out right now (if you attended Easter Vigil, you dusted off last night). Day one – light. Day two... sky and water. Day three... land and plants. Day four... sun, moon, and stars. Day five... fish and birds. Day six... animals and humans. Congratulations, you get an "A." But don't think so specifically. Generally speaking, what did God create? Let me give you some hints... "Let the water teem with living creatures... Let the land produce living creatures... God breathed into the man's nostrils the breath of life, and the man become a living being." Very simply, God created life. And there was no counterpart. There was no death. No death to plants. No death to animals. No death to people.

But then death came. Death, which was once only a threat became a reality. Death was introduced to this living world and the matchmaker was Adam. "Death came through a man... in Adam all die." Everyone... every thing is exposed to death because of what happened at that tree in the middle of the garden. That doesn't seem fair! Because Adam ate a piece of fruit, we die? Let's clarify. We die because we sin. The wages of sin – our sin, not Adam's – the wages of our sin is death. I fall short of the glory of God. But death itself exists, or you might say, death was conceived or death came to life when Adam sinned. That sounds weird – death came to life – but that's what happened when Adam sinned. Death was non-existent until Adam sinned.

That's such a foreign concept for us because death is such a part of our life. We maybe even call it our "natural lot" or our "destiny." Death and taxes are the only things you can be certain of. Because death is so commonplace, I'm really slowing down here and letting the gears work. I think it's so hard for us to grasp a world where death was non-existent. Try doing it. Oh, we maybe don't always want to talk about death. We maybe try to ignore its existence, especially when it comes to my personal life. But there is no denying death's existence. Why are the trees bare? Because their leaves died last fall. Why are you having an Easter ham? Because a pig died. Why does a third of our campus have granite jutting out of it? Is it just a lawn-mowing obstacle course? No, it's because people died. Ever since Adam sinned, death has been part of life as we know it.

But that's not the life that God wanted Adam to know. And that's not the life God wants you to know. And that's what we're here to celebrate today. Yes, death came through a man. But the resurrection of the dead also comes through a man and that man is Jesus. Think about this: if death rises up, it's no longer death. Mind-blowing here, but what is the resurrection? Strictly speaking, it's the death of death. Or you might say it's the restoration of Eden, where death didn't exist and there's only life. And that's what Jesus did on Easter Sunday. When he rose from the grave, death could no longer affect him.

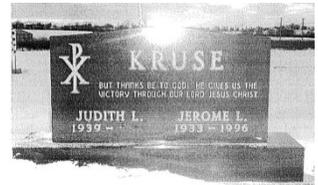
But what about us? We still have dead trees. We still have Easter hams. We still have cemeteries, and maybe some of us got a really close look at one this year. That pain was real. Death is real to us. The chains of death still seem to be wrapped around our minds and even tighter around our hearts. And to some extent, I'd say you're right. The Bible would say you're right. But the Bible would also say the chains are being stretched further every day. Death's grip is loosening. I love the purposeful words in our lesson. "Christ has indeed been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep." Did you catch the difference? Christ rose from what? From *the dead*. He was the first one to do so. If he's the first, that means there are more to follow. But because he paved the way, what are we? It doesn't say dead. Rather, merely fallen asleep. And you can feel death's grip loosening. Oh, it's still hanging on, but not as tight.

I found Luther's words¹ on this section helpful. When talking about death being the last enemy, he says it's like we're already out of the grave with the right leg. And the Lord, who left the grave entirely a long time ago, is there up on the surface offering his hand, pulling us out. We're more than halfway out and the only thing left in the grave is our left toe. Our sin – erased. God's wrath and hell – extinguished. Our soul already has eternal life and all the blessings of living with Christ. It's just our bodies that need to decay before they can join the soul. Death can't hold us. Death can't harm us. Really, the only thing we're waiting for is the final buzzer, the last trumpet. To use the Final Four picture, you might say the championship is still going on. The clock doesn't read 0:00. Death, the last enemy, is still on the floor. But the score is 100-0 and Christ is simply dribbling out the clock.



Tomorrow night, I'm going to sit down and watch a championship game with 12 million other viewers (if 70 million fill out brackets, I don't get why only 12 million watch, but that's what Google said). Anyway, every year that I watch that game I think of this man, my college basketball coach. He went to the Final Four as a spectator every year that I knew him. To say the least, Coach was a gruff man. Even the gospel sounded gruff coming from him. More than once I remember his post-game speech, "Men, it's a good thing that your eternal salvation didn't depend on how you played tonight, or we'd all be in trouble." Sounded gruff, but he was right. Thankfully, it doesn't depend on us. We couldn't take down the first enemy, much less the last enemy to be destroyed, death.

But Christ did. Christ destroyed death for himself first. And Christ will destroy death for you. Our theme verse for this Lenten season has been, "Christ did not come to be served, but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many." Today we see that "many" is you. That many is "all." "In Christ all will be made alive." Which is why when my coach died on an Easter Sunday my junior year, his grave could say, "Thanks be to God, he gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ." Your grave can say the same. The last enemy to be destroyed is death and Christ has done it for you. Game over. AMEN.



¹ Luther's Works 28:133.